

FAYETTE COUNTY

Lexington says homelessness at historic low. So why are homeless shelters still full?

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Earlier this week, Lexington announced the number of people experiencing homelessness in Kentucky's second-largest city dropped to the lowest level since at least 2005.

A Jan. 24 count of homeless people in shelters, transitional housing and on the streets showed 685 homeless people, a 55 percent decrease from the 1,544 people counted in the point-in-time count in 2014, in all-time high. It's also a decrease from 2017 when 1,051 people were identified as homeless in Fayette County.

Since 2014, the city has focused its efforts and funding to moving people into permanent housing, which has resulted in the drop in overall homelessness, the city said in a written release.

Yet, nonprofits that shelter and help the homeless say they are not seeing a decrease in the number of homeless people seeking shelter and services. The Catholic Action Center — which houses both men and women — has been at or above its 130-bed capacity since July. The Salvation Army of Central Kentucky — which houses women and children — has also not seen a drop in the number of people in its 180-bed shelter, Salvation Army officials said. Staff at Arbor Youth Services, which has 10 beds for kids under age 18, said its numbers fluctuate but the provider has not seen an overall drop in need.

The Hope Center's emergency shelter for homeless men has also not seen a decrease in the number of people seeking emergency shelter, said Carrie Thayer, director of development for Lexington's largest shelter.

"People are not staying as long in our emergency shelter now," Thayer said. That's because the city has implemented and funded programs that get people directly into housing, she said. The Hope Center helps oversee the city's Housing First program, which provides apartments to the chronically homeless, Thayer

said. In 2014, 186 people were identified as chronically homeless — people who have lived in a shelter or on the street for more than a year. In 2018, that number plummeted to 92.

The federal government also has more programs for homeless veterans.

“If they are a homeless veteran, they do not remain in our shelter for long because there are resources available to them,” Thayer said.

In 2014, there were 203 homeless veterans. In 2018, that number dropped by more than half to 93 homeless veterans.

Polly Ruddick, the director of the city’s office of Homeless Prevention and Intervention, said the 2018 homeless count showed the number of people in emergency shelters has actually increased. The overall drop in homelessness was driven by decreases in the number of people who were counted as living outside and those in transitional housing.

“The city has focused on permanent housing. In the past, providers would work to move individuals and families from shelters to transitional housing and then to permanent housing. Research has shown that transitional housing is ineffective in reducing and ending homelessness,” Ruddick said.

Another reason why the number of people counted as homeless dropped so dramatically this year: The city didn’t count people in the Hope Center’s drug and alcohol recovery residential programs. Those people have been included in previous year’s homeless counts as living in transitional housing. Thayer said many of the people in Hope Center’s drug treatment programs are not homeless.

In 2017, there were 399 people in transitional housing. In 2018, the number plummeted to 52.

Ruddick said the people in those drug and alcohol recovery programs should not have been counted as homeless under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development guidelines, the federal agency that oversees the homeless census numbers. Louisville and the Kentucky Housing Corp., which oversees the statewide homeless count, do not count people in residential drug and alcohol treatment as homeless, she said.

“HUD guidelines, in place for several years, state, ‘Beds and units in the Housing Inventory Count must be dedicated to serving homeless persons, or for permanent housing projects, dedicated for persons who were homeless at entry,’” Ruddick said.

Laura Carr of the Lexington Rescue Mission, a nonprofit that helps homeless people connect with jobs and other services, said she applauds the city's investment and its stepped-up efforts to address homelessness, including the creation of the office of Homeless Prevention and Intervention in 2014. The city has pushed the entire homeless provider system to provide permanent, long-term housing solutions for the homeless.

That's a good thing, she said.

But Carr said the mission is seeing a greater demand for services.

"The trend we have seen is that the number of homeless people who come here for services has increased over the last five years," Carr said. "So, while we have definitely come a long way and should celebrate the improvements we are making in addressing homelessness, there is still a hidden population of homeless people – including those who are leaving incarceration, those who are sleeping on couches, and those who are sleeping in their vehicles – who are often overlooked and need help getting into housing."

Ruddick said the city realizes there is still a lot of work to be done.

"Every night there are still about 700 people in our community with no place to call home, and many hundreds more on the margins, fighting to stay off the streets," Ruddick said. "Our work continues until everyone in Lexington has access to opportunities, support services, and safe, decent, affordable housing."

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